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The Science of Happiness

Creating a Meaningful Life

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"Enjoying a real increase in your own happiness is in fact attainable, if you are prepared to do the work." - Professor Lyubomirsky

Professor Lyubomirsky has spent two decades as a research psychologist addressing the meanings and mysteries of happiness. The main questions driving her research are whether it is possible to acquire more happiness, and whether new happiness can endure. The author of two books: The How of Happiness and The Myths of Happiness, Dr. Lyubomirsky introduced herself to the Common Ground audience as not a clinician, life coach or self-help guru, but rather as a full-time research scientist. She offered concrete, research-based suggestions about raising happiness levels. Dr. Lyubomirsky assured the audience: "If you make a decision to be happier in your life, and you understand that this is a weighty decision that will take effort, commitment and some discipline, know that you can make it happen."

Though people do not all define happiness in the same way, Dr. Lyubomirsky believes that much of what people do in life is aimed at becoming happier. Moreover, being happy appears to be a universal goal. Research done in the United States, Greece, Germany, South Africa, China and Argentina shows citizens of all those countries rate the importance of happiness for themselves and, more importantly, for their children, as about a 6.7 on a 7-point scale.

According to Dr. Lyubomirsky's research, happy people:

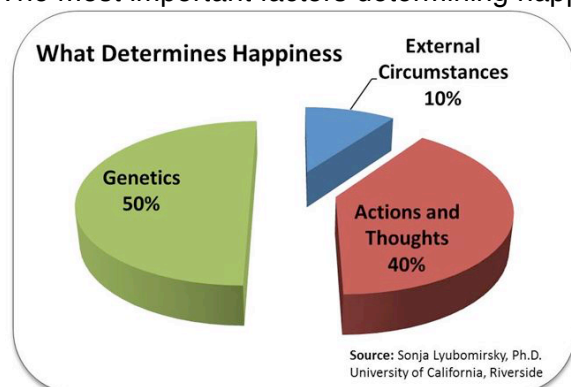
- are more productive at work and more creative;
- make more money and have superior jobs;
- are better leaders and negotiators;
- more likely to marry and have a fulfilling marriage and less likely to divorce;
- have more friends and social support;
- have stronger immune systems, are physically healthier and even live longer;
- are more helpful and philanthropic; and
- are more resilient.

WHERE TO START?

Research suggests that the initial steps to becoming happier can be implemented straightaway. The first step involves recognizing that our yearning to increase our happiness is not just wishful thinking. It's an important goal that we all have a right to pursue and the wherewithal to achieve.

THE 40% SOLUTION

The most important factors determining happiness are represented in the following simple pie chart:



The left-hand slice of the pie shows that 50% of the differences among people's happiness levels can be accounted for by their genetically determined set points. The discovery comes from research with identical and fraternal twins that suggests that each of us is born with a particular happiness set point that originates from our biological mother or father.

Perhaps the most counterintuitive finding is that as the chart shows, only about 10% of the variance in our happiness levels is explained by differences in life circumstances or situations.

These findings are supported by scientific research. One study demonstrated that the richest Americans, those earning more than \$10 million annually, report levels of happiness only slightly higher than the office staffs and the blue-collar workers they employ.

The pie chart illustrates that the key to happiness lies not in changing our genetic makeup (which is impossible) and not in changing our circumstances (i.e. seeking wealth or attractiveness or a new spouse) but in our daily intentional activities. 40% is under our control!

HOW TO FIND HAPPINESS ACTIVITIES THAT FIT YOUR INTERESTS, VALUES, & NEEDS

When it comes to determining which happiness strategies will work for a particular individual, Dr. Lyubomirsky believes in taking a personalized approach. She has developed a self-diagnostic test that uses a systematic, empirically based approach to determine which set of happiness activities (out of 12) will be most valuable for you to try. The test takes 15-30 minutes, and should be done in a quiet setting, as it requires effort and concentration. The test yields a short list of four happiness activities to undertake as you begin the happiness-increasing program. The test can be found on pages 74-76 of The How of Happiness or at the following website: http://www.edbatista.com/files/2010/09/Person_Activity_Fit_Diagnostic.pdf

EXAMPLES OF HAPPINESS ACTIVITIES

Keeping a Gratitude Journal: In one study, a group of participants was asked to write down 5 things for which they were thankful once a week for ten weeks. The control groups were asked to think about 5 daily hassles and five major events that had occurred to them. Relative to the control groups, those who expressed gratitude reported feeling more optimistic and satisfied with their lives. They reported fewer physical symptoms and more time spent exercising.

Gratitude Visits: In another study, participants were given one week to write and then hand-deliver a letter of gratitude to someone who had been especially kind and caring to them but who they had never properly thanked. The control groups were offered alternative self-guided happiness exercises. The participants who did gratitude visits showed the largest boosts in happiness of the entire study and those boosts were maintained even one month after the visits.

Writing a Gratitude Letter: One study showed that even simply writing a gratitude letter and not sending it was enough to produce substantial boosts of happiness.

'Best Possible Self' Exercise: For one month, participants were asked to spend 20 minutes writing a narrative description of their 'best possible future selves' – essentially a fantasy of what their lives would be like if their dreams were realized. Participants who engaged in the exercise caught a significant lift in mood compared with a control group that wrote simply about the details of their daily lives.

Perform a VARIETY of Acts of Kindness (all on the same day): In one study, participants were put into two groups and asked to perform five acts of kindness per week over the course of six weeks. The first group was instructed to do the five acts on one single day and the others were to do them anytime throughout the week. Interestingly, the participants who committed acts of kindness on a single day reported higher boosts in their happiness levels.

Volunteer: One study followed 5 women volunteers over a 3-year period. These women all had MS and were chosen to act as peer supporters for 67 other MS patients. They were trained in active and compassionate learning techniques and instructed to call each patient for 15 minutes once a month. The results show that over the three years, the peer supporters experienced increased satisfaction, self-efficacy and feelings of mastery. They reported engaging in more social activities and enduring less depression. They also reported higher levels of self-esteem.

For more, Dr. Lyubomirsky offers a free online course: thebigknow.com/course/be-happy